

Vilnius: Its Own Worst Enemy

By Victor Danilenko

WASHINGTON

Imagine that President Vytautas Landsbergis is arrested and that a cold war chill settles over U.S.-Soviet relations. Who will lose? Everybody: the Soviet Union, the U.S. and, most important, Lithuania itself. Thus, everybody should strive to prevent this from happening.

The Lithuanians, who are entitled to independence if they want it, should respect the procedures in Soviet law that will make their independence possible. Their failure to do so has resulted in the economic blockade that President Mikhail Gorbachev has threatened.

The Soviet Union resolutely did not interfere with changes in Eastern Europe because those changes were made by sovereign and independent states. But Lithuania is a part of the Soviet Union — hence, Moscow's firm response to the Lithuanian Parliament's declaration of independence.

President Gorbachev is as firmly committed to freedom today as in November, when the Berlin Wall crumbled. However, his actions befit a President of a country in which a constituent part wants to secede. He is obliged to protect the whole national interest; otherwise, the Soviet people — almost 300 million — will not understand and support him.

Does Lithuania have the right to self-determination, up to and including secession? Absolutely, if that is what they want. Nobody contests their right to secede, set forth in Arti-

cle 72 of the Soviet Constitution.

Is Mr. Gorbachev ready to recognize this right? Yes. The problem involves respect for the law, harmonizing the interests of all the parties and adhering to democratic procedures.

Yes, on March 11 the Lithuanian Parliament voted to secede. But what about the resolution passed March 16 by the Congress of People's Deputies that declared Vilnius's vote invalid because it contradicted Articles 74

Soviet law guarantees independence.

and 75 of the Constitution? The articles state that Soviet law overrides the laws of republics and that Soviet sovereignty extends throughout its entire territory. Moreover, on April 5 the Congress adopted legislation mandating that, to secede, a republic must conduct a referendum, that two-thirds of the voters must vote for secession and that five years be spent preparing the transition.

It is easy to understand the Lithuanian people's yearning for independence. What is hard to understand is the leaders' actions. Why on earth do they insist on talks with the Soviet Union in Poland or Sweden when they can talk in Moscow? The basis of the talks would be the law on secession procedure adopted by the Congress, which comprises, among others, deputies elected from Lithuania.

That new law brought Article 72 into play; until it was passed, there

was no legal mechanism to implement Article 72. It is too bad that we did not adopt such a law earlier, but we corrected the mistake.

Everything is as simple as that. But Lithuania is boycotting this solution in order to push Mr. Gorbachev to the wall. His situation is very complicated. The use of force would mean that perestroika has failed. Not only would this affect his political future, it would hand the hardliners a trump card. The West would react immediately and harshly to the use of force.

The Lithuanians expect that Mr. Gorbachev will not dare risk his costly gains in relations with the U.S. and the world in general. So, their reasoning goes, press a little harder and he will give in. This smacks of blackmail.

Of course, Lithuania is an internal Soviet matter that is exclusively up to the Soviet Union to settle. Nonetheless, the U.S. is already involved. President Bush has said that he will not stand for the use of force — that the issue should be settled peacefully, through political means.

Appropriate signals continue to be sent to Moscow. But why only to Moscow? Why doesn't Washington, whose avowed interest lies with perestroika, send appropriate signals to Vilnius to show more political wisdom? They would be heeded, since Lithuania's leaders have staked their country's future on support and assistance from abroad, the main source of their strength. They would in all likelihood become flexible, and a peaceful political solution would be found.

The détente created so painstakingly through the joint efforts of the Soviet and American leaders would be preserved. This would certainly meet the U.S.'s national interests. □

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